

We all need to do our bit for biodiversity

As we near the end of the International Year of Biodiversity, Roger Thomas, Chief Executive of the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), looks at the challenges facing biodiversity in Wales and at what Heritage Lottery Fund grants have done to get people involved in reversing the decline.

In a society where “want” out-trumps “need” and where too-much is never enough, biodiversity faces an enormous challenge. That this has been the International Year of Biodiversity may have passed some by, but biodiversity, the wealth of life on earth, should concern us all.

We are absolutely dependent on our natural environment for our very survival. It provides us with all the fundamentals of life - clean air, pure water, productive soils and the natural resources upon which our industries are based. Less obviously, ecosystems provide the mechanisms that regulate our climate, control floods, recycle our wastes and create compounds and chemicals from which medicines are made.

Although our understanding of the goods and services - the benefits - provided by the natural environment is improving, we are still losing biodiversity at a rate estimated to be 1000 times more than would naturally occur. We take biodiversity for granted. We are part of it, can't live apart from it and most of the benefits we gain from it have no alternatives. The Heritage Lottery Fund's approach to grant-giving has been an important catalyst to some projects that are instrumental in establishing a sustainable future and conserving the biodiversity of Wales.

HLF puts people-action at the forefront of every project, encouraging more and more people to actively learn and get involved in projects which will have a positive and long-lasting impact on biodiversity. Little by little, people are making a difference on a local and national level. As more people get involved, that difference will become more evident. And with 73 per cent of tourists claiming to visit Wales for our landscapes and natural beauty, this work is also an investment in our economy which depends on tourism as its biggest industry.

Since it was established in 1994, HLF grants in Wales have bought land equivalent to 1,380 rugby pitches for nature conservation purposes, amounting to an investment of over £7 million; landscape-wide conservation projects have been funded on the Clwydian Range, around the Tywi river and on the industrial landscape around Blaenavon addressing specific habitats and species such as the black grouse, heather moorland, traditional farming systems and wetlands. On a more local scale, projects have worked to sustain population of dormice, bats and osprey, and habitats such as shingle-beds, heathlands and ancient woodlands.

HLF projects link people with biodiversity, by actively communicating the widespread and essential nature of the benefits that nature gives us all.

So getting people involved in HLF funded projects has been crucial to their success, with many providing structured training courses as well as informal family learning sessions, equipping people with the skills and confidence they need to play their part.

The Gwent Orchards project, for instance, was awarded a grant earlier this year and is now working with the local community to explain the value of traditional orchards as havens for wildlife. Landowners are being taught how to look after existing

orchards and a community orchard will be established to focus education activity and to get as many people involved as possible.

Similarly, the North Wales Wildlife Trust project, Dormice Forever, has been hugely successful in attracting volunteers to survey dormouse populations and to help conserve the habitat connectivity they depend on. A self-sustaining dormouse group has been set up, with 21 volunteers who are now accredited agents on the dormouse licence. Most of these volunteers are now assigned to a specific woodland to monitor dormice populations and to survey habitats.

Reversing the decline in biodiversity demands that the UK sets inspirational targets for the decade ahead and that support is galvanised across the globe. However much is done globally, we all have a stake in Wales's biodiversity and a responsibility to kick our unsustainable habits. We are both the problem and the solution here.

Every day we can all make a difference by reducing the number of car journeys we make, switching lights off and recycling our papers and glass; but for even more of an impact, we can get actively involved in nature conservation projects which will sustain delicately balanced ecosystems. We have the power to change people's attitudes towards our environment and if we all do our bit we really can make a difference to what Wales is today and what it will be in the future.

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*International Year of Biodiversity is organised by the United Nations. More information here: <http://www.cbd.int/2010/welcome/>

**Source for Visit Wales statistic

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